

EAST TIMOR: TOWARDS 'LIFE, LIBERTY & THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS'

**presented by Elizabeth Exposto
East Timorese youth ambassador
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My name is Elizabeth Exposto and I was born in Viqueque, East Timor. In 1975 I left East Timor in my mother's arms. I was just eight months old and completely unaware of the tragedy that had befallen my country.

My parents and I escaped as refugees aboard a Norwegian cargo ship bound for Darwin in northern Australia. For the past eighteen years I have been living in Melbourne, Australia.

I grew up on stories about what life was like for my parents and extended family back home in East Timor before 1975. These stories often made me feel envious and angry because I had been robbed of sharing the same experiences. I'd like to tell you a little about my family so you can get an insight into the lives of East Timorese people.

My mother's parents are from a small village called Lolotoi in the western part of East Timor. They were farmers who owned their own land and lived in a large bamboo house with a thatched grass roof. Their land was very precious to them and on it they grew corn, tapioca, coconut, rice, sweet potatoes, beans, peanuts, green vegetables and bananas. They also had pigs, goats, buffalos and dogs. They were very self-sufficient. Grandfather would wake up at sunrise and before anything else, he would feed his beloved animals then walk to his fields to tend his land.

Grandmother spent much of her time at home taking care of their 19 children. Yes, nineteen. Sometimes she and the older children would help Grandfather harvest the corn or sow the seed for next season's crops. On Sundays the family rested because that day is reserved for the Lord. My grandparents are deeply religious and I believe it is this strong faith that has kept them going in the face of all their suffering.

As you have probably guessed, the Portuguese brought the Roman Catholic faith to East Timor when they colonized it nearly 500 years ago. Today 95% of East Timorese are Catholics and the Roman Catholic Church is the only East Timorese institutions that has survived the Indonesian invasion. Priests, nuns and lay teachers still play a very important role in our liberation struggle and in the preservation of our culture. Masses are said in Tetun, one of our indigenous languages for example, as a way of preserving our language. We have great hopes that the Pope, like his Bishop in East Timor and many of his priests and nuns, will support our struggle for self-determination.

But back to my maternal grandparents. When the Indonesians arrived, their life changed completely. The land that had been theirs for generations was stolen from them and became the property of a certain Indonesian general. With the land went all the livestock and their way of living for centuries. They were resettled in a concentration camp where my once young able bodied grandparents were transformed into living skeletons. Everything they had held sacred had been stolen from them. They could not even produce the food they needed for their own survival. They were luckier than many East Timorese at this time though- because at least they *did* survive.

My paternal grandparents fared little better after the invasion. They come from Dili the capital of East Timor. My grandfather was the son of a Portuguese soldier who had settled on the island in the early 1920s and married my grandmother, the daughter of a Portuguese sailor and a Timorese woman. My grandfather was one of fifteen children and became a clerk in the Portuguese administration. He and my grandmother had ten children and lived a very western lifestyle: I have pictures taken in the 1950s of my grandmother in very fashionable dresses, pearls and high heel shoes looking as though she stepped out of a fashion magazine. Their house in Dili was constructed out of a mixture of western and traditional materials like bamboo and thatch.

I met my grandmother and other relatives when I was fourteen, but I never saw my paternal grandfather. He became very ill in 1987 and, because the hospitals in Dili had few drugs and few trained medical personnel, my uncle bribed an Indonesian customs officer to rush my grandfather go to a hospital in Jakarta. He died on arrival. I'm sure if he had been able to receive proper medication in Dili, he would be alive today.

Because they come from fairly privileged backgrounds, both my parents received an education. My mother attended a boarding school and became a primary school teacher. My father served three years in the Portuguese army and became a mechanic. When war broke out, both had relatively good jobs in East Timor. When they escaped to Australia they had to start again. My father could speak English so he found employment in his old trade. My mother had never studied English so, like many refugees, had to accept menial jobs in factories to help support the family. She made sure I received a good high school education though and is helping me through university. We younger East Timorese in the diaspora will now be able to use our tertiary education to help our people still in East Timor.

My pilgrimage back to Dili when I was fourteen years old made me realize what I privileged life I was living in Melbourne. My relatives who remained in East Timor had suffered terribly since the invasion of our country. Many had not survived - like an aunt and uncle and their six children who had fled to the mountains after the invasion. When they could no longer find any food, they surrendered to the Indonesians. They thought they would at least be given something to eat, but instead they were lined up along a river bank and shot.

In Dili, all the women I met seemed to be wearing black, and all the men had black arm bands. Everyone was in mourning. No-one smiled or spoke openly to us. This was very strange because my people have a reputation for being very friendly and happy. I got a glimpse of what their day to day lives must have been like when I went to buy an ice cream in a Dili shop - a fairly normal thing for a teenager to do. While I was waiting for the ice cream at the counter, an Indonesian soldier came up beside me with a loaded M16 casually

slung over his shoulder. I have never been so frightened in my life. But this was an everyday intimidation for people in East Timor.

I was very grateful then that I could escape; that I could go back to suburban Melbourne and resume my normal lifestyle. But my cousins, many of them my own age, could not. Every day they had to endure fear and intimidation from Indonesian soldiers and police. Even to protest peacefully was to risk their lives. I realized then that we young East Timorese in the diaspora had to be their voice in the outside world. Because we could speak out without the fear of death. That's when I made the commitment to work for my country of birth, for my family still in East Timor and for all East Timorese. For their right to determine their own political and cultural destiny.

East Timor, as you know, was colonized by the Portuguese nearly five hundred years ago. Later the Dutch colonized what became West Timor and the rest of Indonesia. To the north east of East Timor, the Spanish and later the United States colonized the Philippines; the French took Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; and the British colonized Australia and Malaysia. All these former colonies in our region of Southeast Asia have since won their independence – except for East Timor.

In April 1974, the dictatorship in Portugal was overthrown in what was known as the Revolution of Flowers or the Carnation Revolution. Soon after, a process was initiated to give East Timor independence. At that time, Indonesia recognized our right to self-determination: the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Mr Adam Malik, clearly stated this in a letter to José Ramos Horta who is now the special representative for the resistance outside East Timor. But Mr Malik soon changed his mind. In July 1975, four months before the invasion, the President of Indonesia, General Suharto, was quoted in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper as saying that 'Timor shall not be independent.' (*The Age* 10.7.75) Indonesia and its allies had already decided that East Timor should be part of Indonesia, regardless of what the East Timorese people wanted.

Meanwhile a short civil war had broken out during the process of de-colonization in East Timor. This led to a unilateral declaration of Independence by one of the main political parties and the withdrawal of the Portuguese Governor to the island of Atauro. On the December 7, 1975, the Indonesians invaded and forced the complete withdrawal of the Portuguese administration. So began a process of genocide that to date has killed over 200,000 East Timorese civilians - an estimated one third of the pre-1975 population. Every single East Timorese family has lost close relatives. This scale of genocide is unequalled anywhere in the modern world.

Many of the people killed during and after the invasion, were killed with US supplied weapons. US President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital, just a few hours before the invasion was formally launched. They had already given their approval. And despite several UN and Congressional resolutions condemning the invasion and the violation of human rights in East Timor, the US administration continues to provide economic support to the Indonesian government, and allows the sale of US weapons to that regime.

In 1990 for example, US Congress permitted the delivery of more than \$200,000,000 worth of US military equipment to Indonesia. Some of this was doubtlessly used in Dili

on November 12, 1991, to slaughter more than 270 unarmed civilians at the Santa Cruz cemetery.

Instead of immediately cutting all military and economic aid after that massacre, the Bush Administration proposed to increase military training for the Indonesian army. Fortunately Congress has since voted to end some of that assistance by cutting all training in the US of Indonesian military personnel under the US International Military Education and Training program (IMET). But a further \$84 million worth of military equipment will be exported from the US to Indonesia this year, unless Congress acts to stop these sales. Economic aid to Indonesia is now worth \$5 billion.

We believe that you as tax payers and residents of the United States, have a right to know what your government is doing to support the Indonesian occupation of East Timor and the oppression of the East Timorese people. Young people like me still have a simple faith in the goodness of the American people - that once you know how your government is involved in East Timor, you will pressure your elected representatives to end US complicity in the occupation of my country. You can do this by asking Congress to immediately cut all military aid to Indonesia and immediately insist on the total withdrawal of all Indonesian troops from East Timor. Please also ask your members of Congress to cut all economic aid to Indonesia until that government:

- ends all forms of inhuman treatment including torture, extra-judicial executions, and arbitrary arrests and imprisonment;
- permits unrestricted access to East Timor by international human rights organizations;
- releases all political prisoners, including former leaders of the resistance Xanana Gusmao and Mau Huna;
- ensures that the East Timorese are credibly represented in all talks about the future of East Timor; and
- facilitates a UN-supervised referendum in East Timor as a definitive act of self-determination.

All the people of East Timor want is the right to experience the same freedoms that people in this country take for granted. These freedoms were expressed in your own Declaration of Independence over two hundred years ago. Please help make your dream of 1776 real for us. And please ask your new President and your members of Congress to stop supporting repressive military regimes like Indonesia. Ask them to support the people of the United States instead. Because as we have noticed, there are many people in this country too for whom the dream of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' is still very far away

Elizabeth Exposto is one of five East Timorese who visited North America in April 1993 to talk about the future of their occupied country. Their speaking tour was initiated by the East Timorese community in Melbourne, Australia, with the support of the East Timor Talks Campaign. It was hosted and coordinated in North America by the East Timor Action Network USA and East Timor Alert Network Canada.

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